

Looking West: Russian Perspectives of the Baltics Through the Lens of the Great Patriotic War

A Monograph

by

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2017

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REPORT DOCUMENTATION PAGE				Form Approved OMB No. 0704-0188	
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1. REPORT DATE (DD-MM-YYYY) 13-04-2017		2. REPORT TYPE Master's Thesis		3. DATES COVERED (From - To) JUNE 2016 – MAY 2017	
4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE Looking West: Russian Perspectives of the Baltics Through the Lens of the Great Patriotic War				5a. CONTRACT NUMBER	
				5b. GRANT NUMBER	
				5c. PROGRAM ELEMENT NUMBER	
6. AUTHOR(S) MAJ Jonathan M. Chakeres				5d. PROJECT NUMBER	
				5e. TASK NUMBER	
				5f. WORK UNIT NUMBER	
7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) U.S. Army Command and General Staff College ATTN: ATZL-SWD-GD Fort Leavenworth, KS 66027-2301				8. PERFORMING ORG REPORT NUMBER	
9. SPONSORING / MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) Advanced Military Studies Program.				10. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S ACRONYM(S)	
				11. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S REPORT NUMBER(S)	
12. DISTRIBUTION / AVAILABILITY STATEMENT Approved for Public Release; Distribution is Unlimited					
13. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES					
14. ABSTRACT Many observers cite the deterioration of relations between Russia and the West as an indication of growing Russian ambition and naked aggression. Growing numbers of reports and studies focus on Russia's offensive military capabilities and postulate how Russia could invade the small Baltic countries of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania. These discussions are misleading because they lack an overall political and strategic framework to examine any conflict between Russia and the Baltics. This monograph uses the Russian experience in World War II as a lens to view Russia's perspectives towards the Baltics and to observe what historical legacies are still relevant. The monograph uses a variety of secondary sources, as well as translated Russian professional military writings and official statements to illustrate both change and continuity in Russian security policies towards the Baltics since World War II. Russia's most important lessons from the Great Patriotic War include the requirement to protect their western borders from sudden invasion and the threat from disloyal ethnic or nationalist groups that undermine military objectives and the narrative of national unity. Additionally, the lengthy resistance to Soviet occupation before, during and after the war suggests that even the most ambitious Russian policymakers today are likely to be skeptical of any idea involving the permanent occupation of these non-Slavic states. Instead, any Russian actions will likely serve to deny NATO the use of military infrastructure in the region, prevent the defection of Belarus to the West, and reinforce Moscow's domestic narratives. The statements and actions of Russian leaders today suggest a strong continuity of geostrategic thinking towards the Baltic region, and they indicate that the legacy of the Great Patriotic War is still potent in the minds of Russian officials.					
15. SUBJECT TERMS Russia; Baltics; Great Patriotic War; Estonia; Latvia; Lithuania					
16. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF:			17. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT	18. NUMBER OF PAGES	19a. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE PERSON
a. REPORT	b. ABSTRACT	c. THIS PAGE			MAJ Jonathan M. Chakeres
(U)	(U)	(U)	(U)	43	19b. PHONE NUMBER (include area code) 785-477-0595

Monograph Approval Page

Name of Candidate: MAJ Jonathan M. Chakeres

Monograph Title: Looking West: Russian Perspectives of the Baltics Through the Lens of the Great Patriotic War

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Abstract

Looking West: Russian Perspectives of the Baltics Through the Lens of the Great Patriotic War, by MAJ Jonathan M. Chakeres, US Army, 43 pages.

Many observers cite the deterioration of relations between Russia and the West as an indication of growing Russian ambition and naked aggression. Growing numbers of reports and studies focus on Russia's offensive military capabilities and postulate how Russia could invade the small Baltic countries of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania. These discussions are misleading because they lack an overall political and strategic framework to examine any conflict between Russia and the Baltics. This monograph uses the Russian experience in World War II as a lens to view Russia's perspectives towards the Baltics and to observe what historical legacies are still relevant. The monograph uses a variety of secondary sources, as well as translated Russian professional military writings and official statements to illustrate both change and continuity in Russian security policies towards the Baltics since World War II. Russia's most important lessons from the Great Patriotic War include the requirement to protect their western borders from sudden invasion and the threat from disloyal ethnic or nationalist groups that undermine military objectives and the narrative of national unity. Additionally, the lengthy resistance to Soviet occupation before, during and after the war suggests that even the most ambitious Russian policymakers today are likely to be skeptical of any idea involving the permanent occupation of these non-Slavic states. Instead, any Russian actions will likely serve to deny NATO the use of military infrastructure in the region, prevent the defection of Belarus to the West, and reinforce Moscow's domestic narratives. The statements and actions of Russian leaders today suggest a strong continuity of geostrategic thinking towards the Baltic region, and they indicate that the legacy of the Great Patriotic War is still potent in the minds of Russian officials.

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Acknowledgement

I would like to thank my wife, Jeralee Hartman for her support and dedication. I would also like to thank my brothers, Chris and Nat Chakeres for their inspiration, and the faculty and staff of the Command and General Staff College and the School of Advanced Military Studies for all the time, energy and dedication they devote to developing future leaders.

Acronyms

BMD	Baltic Military District
GUBB	Glavnoe Upravlenie po Bor'be s Banditizmom (Directorate for Struggle Against Banditry)
MCIS	Moscow Conference on International Security
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NKVD	Narodnyi Komissariat Vnutrennikh Del (Peoples Commissariat for Internal Affairs)
TVD	Teatry Voennikh Destvii (Theater of Military Operation)
USSR	Union of Soviet Socialist Republics

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Introduction

The political purpose and the means to achieve it give rise to the military objective. This ultimate goal of the entire belligerent act, or of the particular campaign if the two are identical, is therefore the first and most important issue that the strategist must address...

— Carl von Clausewitz, *Two Letters on Strategy*, 1827

Recent Russian military interventions in Georgia, Ukraine and Syria stoked fears in Europe and the United States that Vladimir Putin will attempt to attack one or more of the small geographically vulnerable Baltic states of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania. Many Western analysts argue that Russia's so-called New Generation Warfare signals a revolutionary change in Russian strategic thinking and propose a wide array of explanations for Russia's aggressive actions. In contrast to many of these claims, this monograph argues that Russian policymakers are heavily influenced by the country's past humiliations, not future exploitive prospects. Russia attacked and occupied all three Baltic States twice in the twentieth century, a fact that many experts rarely discuss today. The period surrounding the Great Patriotic War is a valuable lens through which to view Russia's strategic outlook, and it retains extraordinary significance in Russia today. This monograph seeks to answer what lessons Russia learned from the Great Patriotic War, and how these lessons influence Russia's perspective of the Baltics.

Many expert analyses of Russia and the Baltics portray a despairingly bleak picture of Russian power and NATO helplessness. A 2016 RAND Corporation study predicted that in the event of a Russian incursion into the Baltics, NATO forces would be unable to prevent the Russian military from reaching Tallinn and Riga in sixty hours.¹ A recent book by the Jamestown

¹ David A. Shlapak, Michael Johnson, *Reinforcing Deterrence on NATO's Eastern Flank Wargaming the Defense of the Baltics* (Santa Monica: RAND Corp, 2016), accessed September 21, 2016. http://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR1253.html.

Foundation claims that Russia's intent to annex the Baltic region is perfectly clear.² Other analysis focuses on the deployment of NATO battalions in the Baltics and Poland as well as the comparative strengths of NATO and Russian armor, aircraft and naval vessels. Numerous Western military and political journals regularly publish scholarly articles on Russian military developments and threats to Georgia, Ukraine, and the Baltics. None of these analyses of tactical outcomes, however, are based upon a strategic or operational framework, and most ignore any political objectives of the belligerents, which undermines many of the assessments. In other words, while studies such as RAND's forecast Russian tanks in Tallinn and Riga, no one seems to question why Russian tanks would be ordered to the Baltic capitals, or just what the tanks would do once they rolled in. A good framework to conceptualize Russian strategic thinking is World War II. Russia's lessons from the Great Patriotic War provide a lens through which to analyze the Kremlin's strategic thinking.



Figure 1. Illustration of Russian Strategy. *Reinforcing Deterrence on NATO's Eastern Flank* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2016), 6.

² Janusz Bugajski and Margarita Assenova, *Eurasian Disunion: Russia's Vulnerable Flanks*, (Washington, DC: Jamestown Foundation, 2016), 68.

The historic influence between Russia and the Baltics is long and bitter. The three Baltic nations were Soviet republics between the end of World War II and 1991, when they each gained their independence from the USSR. They each share a border with Russia and became full NATO members in 2004, deeply offending Russia. Today, they all have sizeable ethnic Russian minorities, and issues such as language education and war memorials continue to be divisive issues in both internal politics and diplomatically. Western leaders fear that Russia may rapidly overrun one or more of the small, indefensible countries before NATO had time to react or foment political instability that would paralyze any national or regional response. Although recent history suggests that conflict within this region may be likely, a deeper understanding of the dynamics is needed.

To better understand the Russian strategic and operational attitudes towards the Baltics, this monograph will examine the period surrounding the Great Patriotic War, which has influenced Moscow's attitude towards national security for seventy-five years. Russia's perpetual fear of being isolated by hostile powers and suddenly attacked is deeply ingrained within the psyche of many Russian leaders. Despite enormous political turmoil, there has been continuity throughout the Soviet and post-Soviet periods about several key aspects of the war, and their significance to the Baltics. The most significant lessons from the Great Patriotic War that still resonate in Russia today are the threat to their western borders, the difficulty in securing and incorporating non-Slavic borderlands, and the danger from real or perceived destabilizing agents in or around their country, such as modern day Color Revolutions.

This monograph examines the Russian and Baltic political and military histories between 1938 and 1953, and the Soviet and post-Soviet Russian perceptions towards the Baltic region. The period surrounding the Great Patriotic War includes the pre-war political machinations that resulted in German entry onto Russia's doorstep in 1938 and 1939. The internal political struggles within the three small nations helped facilitate German and Soviet intrusion during the lead-up to World

War II and highlighted to Soviet leaders how geographically and politically isolated the Baltics were.

Today, Russia feels the same insecurity that it felt in 1941. The Baltic States serve as an historic invasion route into Russia, and NATO has replaced Nazi Germany as the arch-villain. Where the United States and NATO observers see three tiny, militarily insignificant countries trapped under Russia's powerful grip, Moscow sees a vast staging area for a technologically superior military alliance that openly calls Russia an enemy. The loss of the Eastern European buffer zone after the fall of the USSR has only made Russian officials more paranoid about their security, not less. Russia's "right flank" fell during the Great Patriotic War, and more than a million Russians died in the ensuing siege of Leningrad. Today, Russia's right flank has been surrendered to NATO, and Russian policymakers fear what the consequences may be.

History, Strategy and Russia

Interpreting Russian strategic motives has been a challenge for outside observers for generations. Even prior to the twentieth century, European and American experts struggled to grasp the intentions of Imperial tsars, often relating Russian strategy to a matryoshka doll; a series of mysteries concealed inside one another. Throughout the Cold War, an abundance of Sovietologists in the West carefully pored over Russian military statistics and Politburo decisions, but still misunderstood important dynamics of the USSR, such as the Sino-Soviet split, the various policies in Eastern Europe and the internal frailties facing Moscow's leaders.

Today, Russian geostrategic motives are the subject of intense debate among academic, military and political experts, and there is little consensus on what the Kremlin's unwritten foreign policy goals are. Unlike the United States, the trauma and triumphs of World War II still heavily influence Russian thinking, and Russia still fears attacks by an outside power while being weakened by internal discord. The significance of the Great Patriotic War has only grown under President

Vladimir Putin, who increasingly uses its memory and myth to promote patriotism and national unity.³ Any assessment of Russian geopolitical motives should include the historical underpinnings of how Russia views the world, and Russia's memory of the Great Patriotic War is far more prominent than many outsiders acknowledge.

Why World War II?

There are several important reasons to examine World War II as a lens through which to view Russian national security perspectives today. In terms of the Baltics, the time period provides two historical examples of Russian military invasion of the Baltics; the first in 1940 and the second throughout 1944 and 1945. The Great Patriotic War was also the most important national event in the twentieth century, and its legacy continues to dominate Russian political and military speeches, writings and policies. Two major indicators within Russia suggest why the topic is so significant to Russian security policymakers: President Vladimir Putin's personal emphasis on the subject, and the ongoing discourse about the topic held by military officials in Russia's professional journals.

Since taking office in 2000, Vladimir Putin has placed increasing significance on celebrating the Great Patriotic War and the Russian victory over fascist invaders in 1945. As one historian notes, "the frequent invocation of World War II and its leading holiday May 9 have, over the last ten years, increasingly taken on a *personal* quality designed to identify Putin directly with the holiday and the victory in the war."⁴ Observers both inside and outside of Russia have echoed such sentiments since Putin's rise to power.

³ "Great patriotic war, again: Vladimir Putin twists the memory of the Soviet Union's victory over Nazism to justify his struggle against the West," *Economist* (May 2015), accessed October 24, 2016, <http://www.economist.com/news/europe/21650177-vladimir-putin-twists-memory-soviet-unions-victory-over-nazism-justify-his-struggle>.

⁴ Elizabeth Wood, "Performing Memory: Vladimir Putin and the Celebration of World War II in Russia," *The Soviet and Post-Soviet Review* 38, no. 2 (September 2011):172-200.

Outside observers should not dismiss the significance Russians attach to the Great Patriotic War as a public affairs stunt. Several generations of Russians grew up learning about the trials and tribulations of the Russian nation from World War II veterans, and it is now the most significant national holiday, surpassing even the 7 November commemoration of the Great October Socialist Revolution.⁵ The celebration of World War II captures the pride and emotion of the nation, as well as its strong place in the modern world. As another historian notes, “[F]or modern Russia, the Great Patriotic War stands out as the chief event of the past, partly because of the immense losses and sacrifices, but also as a defining moment for the world as a whole.”⁶ Whether Putin and other leaders manipulate the memory of the past is irrelevant; the emotional significance of the Great Patriotic War is very real in the minds of Russian citizens.

The war also represents the preeminent subject of study by the Russian military. The military and political lessons from World War II are not easy to decipher, partially because of the different historiographical approaches to the subject throughout the Soviet and post-Soviet periods. Immediately following the war, most Soviet writers and historians carefully scripted the narrative of the war (especially the initial period) in order to conceal Stalin’s numerous mistakes and poor judgement.⁷ It is often difficult to discern what lessons Russian political and military leaders truly gained from the Great Patriotic War, and what written conclusions were simply reflective of contemporary political ideologies. Many of the earliest official Russian histories about the war from the 1950s frame every lesson in ideological terms, such as the discussions of how the steadfast socialist armies ultimately prevailed because they were more righteous than the despicable Hitlerite

⁵ David R. Marples, “Introduction: Historical Memory and the Great Patriotic War” *Canadian Slavonic Papers* 54, no. 3-4 (September 2012): 287.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 288.

⁷ Adam B. Ulam, *Stalin: The Man and His Era* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1989), 637.

imperialists.⁸ Subsequent periods of de-Stalinization in the Soviet Union provided different perspectives of the war, as did *glasnost* and historical re-examinations during the post-Soviet period. Despite the historiographical challenges, several themes remain common: the insecurity of the western border and the need for internal unity.

Not unlike the US military, the Russian military dedicates large amounts of professional writing and discussion towards World War II. The quantity of material dedicated to discussing or memorializing the Great Patriotic War, however, dwarfs that of US journals. Nearly every edition of the Russian army's premier professional journal, *Voennaia mysl'* (Military Thought), includes multiple articles that relate to the Great Patriotic War or its lessons. Even a cursory look through recent editions shows that World War II leaders, tactics, equipment and lessons still feature prominently in nearly every issue.⁹ Many accounts written in the past three decades also usually begin with a common preface: that the historiography of the Great Patriotic War is marred with inaccuracies and falsities, and that modern researchers have a duty to correct the historical record. This repeating claim may be an honest plea to uncover the truth from layers of Soviet falsities, or it may be a political attempt to distort historical accounts to benefit Russian leaders.

Russian Geostrategic Motives Towards the Baltics: A Short Review

Today, there is no shortage of expert opinions about the Kremlin's security policies, or Putin's attitudes towards the Baltics. Since the 1990s experts suggested an array of explanations for Moscow's declining relationship with their western neighbors, and most theories coalesce around

⁸ V.N. Adrianov, Z.A. Bogatyr, et al., *History of the Great Patriotic War of the Soviet Union 1941-1945, Volume 6: Results of the Great Patriotic War*. Translated by the Foreign Technology Division, Wright Patterson Air Force Base, OH. Moscow: Voennoye, 1965.

⁹ Web applications such as Google Chrome provide rough translation of the publication's official site, <http://vm.milportal.ru/>, accessed October 12, 2016. Companies such as Eastview Press also provide English-language translations of *Military Thought*, as well as a searchable database of articles: <https://www.eastview.com/>, accessed October 31, 2016.

three major issues: economic strength, protection of ethnic Russians and some type desire for a traditional sphere of influence with corresponding international recognition. All of these arguments are plausible and have compelling evidence that support different interpretations of Russian geostrategic thinking. In the opaque decision-making circles of the Kremlin, these interpretations have shaped the way many outsiders view Russian motives.

The first general theory is that economic concerns generally drive Russian actions and that Moscow designs policies to maximize control over energy resources and sales to Europe, Eurasia and elsewhere. According to this argument, Moscow's concern with the Baltic region centers on oil and gas reserves off the coast of Lithuania, and the desire to dominate the flow of natural gas to Europe..¹⁰ Russian military threats towards the Baltics and Ukraine, therefore, are primarily political signals to both Eastern and Western Europeans to refrain from seeking any alternative energy sources, such as natural gas production from Lithuanian offshore sources.

The second general theory is that Putin maintains political strength by appealing to supporters through pan-Slavic agendas, seeking to defend the rights of ethnic Russians at home and abroad. Since the 1990s, Russian politicians and media outlets frequently highlighted perceived or real injustices that ethnic Russians face in Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, where they represent up to twenty-seven percent of the national populations. Several theories argue that Russia may attempt to leverage ethnic Russian minorities throughout the region as part of a hybrid war..¹¹ Russia also loudly protested NATO actions against Serbia during the bombing campaign in 1999. For several years following the three countries' ascension into NATO, Putin made multiple public comments

¹⁰ Keith C. Smith, *Russia and European Energy Security: Divide and Dominate* (Washington DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2008), accessed October 24, 2016, https://csis-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/legacy_files/files/media/csis/pubs/081024_smith_russiaeuroenergy_web.pdf.

¹¹ "Latvia," CIA World Factbook, last modified January 12, 2017, accessed March 16, 2017, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/lg.html>.

concerning the rights of ethnic Russians in the Baltics..¹² Similar arguments were made during the annexation of Crimea when Putin stated his desire to “restore unity” to Russians of historical Russia, just as German unity was restored after the fall of the Berlin Wall..¹³ Although some Western experts question the sincerity of these claims, the strong ethno-national pride that Russians feel towards Slavs in Belarus and Ukraine is extremely significant, and Western experts should understand how deeply Russia values such cultural connections.

Perhaps the most prevalent argument made by outside observers to explain recent Russian actions is simply that Moscow wants to dominate their perceived sphere of influence while being gaining international recognition as a superpower. Moscow demonstrates this by conducting long-range bomber flights, large military exercises, and violent incursions into areas such as Ukraine and Syria. After a period of weakness in the 1990s, Russia now wants to regain its place in the world again. Timothy Thomas, a long-time Russia expert with the US Army’s Foreign Military Studies Office, argues that the Soviet apprehension involving border security continued after the collapse of the USSR:

Another tradition that remains is the Russian focus on its borders and immediate operational environment. Russia maintains a consistent approach to its historic spheres of influence and appears set to fight the emergence of any regime, whether truly democratic or not, on its borders. Security for the Russia apparently means total control over any situation that appears to impinge on its concept of sovereignty..¹⁴

¹² “Speech at a Plenary Session of the Russian Federation Ambassadors and Permanent Representatives Meeting,” July 12, 2004, Website of the President of Russia, accessed October 16, 2016, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/22545> and “Annual Address to the Federal Assembly of the Russian Federation,” April 25, 2005, Website of the President of Russia, accessed 16 October, 2016, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/22931>.

¹³ “Transcript: Putin says Russia will protect the rights of Russians abroad,” *Washington Post*, March 18, 2014, accessed November 4, 2016, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/transcript-putin-says-russia-will-protect-the-rights-of-russians-abroad/2014/03/18/432a1e60-ae99-11e3-a49e-76adc9210f19_story.html?utm_term=.b9f92f830bc8.

¹⁴ Timothy L. Thomas, *Recasting the Red Star: Russia Forges Tradition and Technology Through Toughness* (Fort Leavenworth: Foreign Military Studies Office, 2011) 356.

Today, it is primarily NATO that challenges Russia's concept of sovereignty. Following the breakup of the Soviet Union, Russia vigorously opposed the expansion of NATO eastwards, and several Russian leaders including Vladimir Putin questioned why NATO still existed after the demise of the Warsaw Pact.¹⁵

Other observers state this idea more bluntly, arguing that Russia wants to restore the Soviet Union or challenge the West in a new Cold War.¹⁶ Although Putin clearly values the appearance of strength and security, this logic is often too simplistic to explain Russia's strategic objectives towards specific regions, and it does not provide any insights for international policymakers. More importantly, the desire to physically dominate post-Soviet space is contrary to Russia's modern narrative, as discussed in Chapter 3.

These interpretations of Russian policy are useful, and no single explanation can illuminate the Kremlin's inner workings. It is disingenuous, however, to simplify Russia's security policy into one of blind expansion into post-Soviet space and naked aggression towards NATO, as some experts tend to imply. Russia is deeply influenced by its past, and the statements, writings, and actions of Russian leaders articulate that; Western audiences must be willing to listen.

The Threat from the Borders

One the most prevalent topics that appears in Soviet and Russian writings about the Great Patriotic War is the catastrophic failure to defend the western borders at the outset of the German invasion in 1941, and the subsequent disasters during the initial period of the war. Since the war ended, countless Russian authors contributed explanations for the catastrophes of 1941. The official Russian account of the war, the twelve-volume series "The Great Patriotic War of 1941-1945"

¹⁵ Stephen Blank "Threats to and from Russia: An Assessment," *The Journal of Slavic Military Studies* 21, no. 3 (August 2008): 491-526.

¹⁶ Edward Lucas, *The New Cold War* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).

attributes the unpreparedness along the western border regions as one of the biggest lessons of the war.¹⁷ Numerous general officers and academic students writing in *Military Thought* and other Russian military periodicals highlight the strategic mismanagement of forces in 1941. The former General of the Army Makmut Gareev, a decorated World War II veteran and influential chairman of the Russian Academy of Military Science, identified the “catastrophe” of 1941 as the principal source of lessons take from the Great Patriotic War.¹⁸ The German invasion of 1941 left deep scars in the Russian psyche that still resonate today in the minds of political and military leaders.

The Russian obsession with border security manifested itself in August 1939 as part of the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact. Article I of the secret additional protocols declared that Finland, Estonia, Latvia and northern Lithuania would be part of Russia’s “sphere of influence.”¹⁹ Given a free hand by Hitler, Stalin proceeded to force each of the countries into signing defense pacts with the USSR in September and October of 1939 that allowed tens of thousands of Russian troops into each country.²⁰ The following spring, while Hitler attacked France and the Low Countries, Russia seized the opportunity to annex Estonia, Latvia, and northern Lithuania on the pretense that the countries had secretly formed a bloc to plan an attack against Russia. The Red Army and local communist leaders hastily installed new people’s governments that voted to incorporate themselves into the Soviet Union by July 1940.²¹

¹⁷ “Military and Theoretical Lessons” *Volume 12: Results and Lessons of the War* from “The Great Patriotic War of 1941-1945,” Russian Ministry of Defense, accessed November 4, 2016, http://encyclopedia.mil.ru/files/morf/VoV_Vol12_Voennie_uroki.pdf.

¹⁸ M.A. Gareev, “Lessons of the Great Patriotic War, Local Wars and Prospects of Developing Modern Military Science and Military Art,” trans. Eastview Press, *Military Thought* (June 2005): 9-20.

¹⁹ “Modern History Sourcebook: The Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, 1939” Fordham University Internet Modern History Sourcebook, accessed December 13, 2016, <http://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/halsall/mod/1939pact.html>.

²⁰ Romuald Misiunas and Rein Taagepera, *The Baltic States: Years of Dependence 1940-1980*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), 19-20.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 29.

Although many contemporary observers and historians decry the 1940 incorporation as a hasty land grab by Stalin, there was a basis of geostrategic fear behind Russia's motives. Militarily, Russia was now deeply concerned about sharing a border with Germany and feared multi-pronged invasions from the southwest, west, and northwest. A 1938 strategic deployment plan completed by Chief of the Red Army General Staff, General B.M. Shaposhnikov, identified Germany and Italy as the most likely enemies in the west and warned of an invasion through the "Baltic bridgehead" with a combined ninety German and Latvian divisions.²² Additional wargames in 1940 reaffirmed this fear and reinforced the significance of repelling the enemy's northeastern attack as well as retaining the critical Suwakli salient at the juncture of Lithuania and Poland. In response to these threats, Russia hastily constructed dozens of fortifications along their new borders, and began repositioning thousands of soldiers to meet the possible threat from the Baltic region.²³ As events unfolded, the initial German invasion closely resembled the Russians' wargame scenario.

Following the occupation of the Baltics, the Russians scrambled to fortify their newly won territories. Colonel-General Kuznetsov, commander of the peacetime Baltic Special Military District, hurried to fortify the ports in the major harbors such as Tallinn and establish artillery and anti-aircraft defenses.²⁴ Kuznetsov ordered the bridges across the Niemen River in Lithuania to be prepared for demolition as ominous signs of German reconnaissance and troop concentrations grew.²⁵ By June 1941, the Baltic Special Military District comprised of the 8th Army in western Lithuania, the 11th Army in central Lithuania, the 27th Army in reserve to the north and various air

²² David M. Glantz, *The Military Strategy of the Soviet Union: A History* (Portland: Frank Cass, 1992), 74.

²³ *Ibid.*, 75.

²⁴ John Erickson, *The Road to Stalingrad: Stalin's War With Germany* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999) 67-68.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 94.

force and naval assets for a total of 370,000 troops.²⁶ In accordance with Russian defense plans, Kuznetsov believed he would have fifteen days to prepare for an attack, which he planned to block along the Daugava River in Latvia, and then counterattack in coordination with other fronts.²⁷

The opening of Operation Barbarossa, Hitler's invasion of the Soviet Union, did not catch the Russians in the Baltic Military District completely by surprise. Like many other military districts on the eve of war, the leaders of the Baltic Military District detected several strange German activities, including increased German surveillance flights, strange naval activity and civilian rumors of impending German movements.²⁸ Kuznetsov began deploying artillery and other forces towards the border in anticipation of a German attack, but his guidance, and that of Moscow's, was vague and emphasized non-antagonistic measures that confused commanders.²⁹ These measures led to chaos in the opening days of the war that Russian historians later attributed to German deceit and complete tactical surprise.

The rapid German ground attack rapidly defeated Russian infantry and armor divisions as they attempted to concentrate to make counterattacks. The Germans main thrusts aimed at separating the Russian Northwestern Front (as the Baltic Special Military District became once war broke out) from their neighboring fronts to the south.³⁰ The Suwalki salient, the juncture of southern Lithuania, Poland and Belarus, was key terrain that Germans attacked through in 1941 and Russians focused on in 1944.³¹ In the total confusion and breakdown of Russian control, the

²⁶ Pritt Buttar, *Between Giants: The Battle for the Baltics in World War II* (Oxford: Osprey Publishing, 2013). 68.

²⁷ Ibid., 69.

²⁸ Erickson, *The Road to Stalingrad*, 94-96.

²⁹ Ibid., 111.

³⁰ Ibid., 128-129.

³¹ Shtemenko, *The Soviet General Staff*, 371.

Germans quickly penetrated deep into Lithuania and Latvia, isolating the Russian 11th Army and defeating multiple Russian divisions that struggled to concentrate and coordinate their efforts.³²

From the Russian perspective, the Northwestern Front exemplified both the tragedies and the triumphs of the initial period of the war. The German Army Group North attacked the Russians throughout the summer and fall of 1941, as Field-Marshal Ritter von Leeb's three armies rapidly penetrated the Russian Baltic Special Military District. Within three weeks, the Germans advanced 450 kilometers, captured much of Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia and inflicted more than 90,000 casualties on the Russians.³³ The Russian General Staff frantically dispatched available units and replaced the leadership of the Northwestern Front in an effort to establish a cohesive defensive line.³⁴ Despite these measures, the loss of the Baltic States, as well as corresponding access to the Baltic Sea, was a terrible blow to Russia.

The Northwest Front also provided a bright spot among the many defeats of 1941. Despite horrendous territorial and materiel losses, the Front was the first to effectively check the German advance. Historian David Glantz notes that throughout 1941, Russia's Northern (Leningrad) and Northwestern Fronts were the first Red Army forces able to halt the otherwise unstoppable German invasion and that this legend of prolonged defense, particularly of Leningrad, "has no other peer either in the Great Patriotic War or modern war."³⁵ Vladimir Putin recently publicly shared personal connections to the siege of Leningrad, claiming that his older brother died in the siege as a child.³⁶

³² Erickson, *The Road to Stalingrad*, 131-132.

³³ David M. Glantz, *Barbarossa: Hitler's Invasion of Russia 1941* (Charleston: Tempus, 2001), 43.

³⁴ John Erickson, *The Soviet High Command: A Military-Political History, 1918-1941* (New York: Frank Cass, 2001), 604-605.

³⁵ David M. Glantz, *The Battle for Leningrad, 1941-1944* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 2002).

³⁶ "70th anniversary of lifting of siege of Leningrad," Website of the President of Russia, January 27, 2014, accessed November 16, 2016, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/20110>.

After losing the Baltics by the end of 1941, Russia turned her attention to Leningrad and the Central Front, which bore the brunt of the German attack. Pro-Russian partisans continued to fight the Germans throughout the Baltics, but the area was out of the reach of the Red Army until the Russian counterattacks in 1943. Although the Germans entered the Baltics to numerous cheering crowds, they failed to take advantage of the widespread anti-Russian sentiments, and instead focused on crushing nationalist political movements and seeking out Jews to eradicate.³⁷ The short-lived German occupation only divided the frayed social fabric of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania further, and gave rise to modern claims of Nazi collaboration.

Following the victories at Stalingrad and Kursk in 1943, Russia began powerful counterattacks across nearly all of their fronts to expel the Germans and liberate occupied territory. Russia began the re-conquest of the three Baltics following the relief of Leningrad in early 1944.³⁸ By April 1944, the Russian General Staff managed to concentrate four major fronts in and around the Baltics: the Leningrad Front, attacking along the northern coast of Estonia, the Third Baltic Front attacking into southern Estonia, and the Second and First Baltic Fronts attacking into Latvia and Lithuania.³⁹ The Russians used similar operational objectives in 1944 as the Germans did in 1941: the Suwalki salient and corresponding communication hubs that connected the German Army Group North and Army Group Center. A senior officer on the Soviet General Staff describes:

Soviet troops were thus engaged in the Baltic area for nearly the whole of 1944. The basic objective throughout was to cut off Army Group North, while at the same time breaking it up and destroying it piecemeal...The enemy could not be allowed to have a strategic bridgehead in the rear of our advancing Fronts. For this reason the Baltic area, in the final stage of the struggle, was constantly in the field of vision of the General Staff and the Supreme Commander.⁴⁰

³⁷ Buttar, *Between Giants*, 137.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 157.

³⁹ Sergei M. Shtemenko, *The Soviet General Staff at War: 1941-1945*, trans. by Robert Daglish (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1985) 343.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 371-372.

Moscow announced the liberation of Vilnius on 13 July 1944 as German army forces withdrew to the west..⁴¹ By November 1944, the German Army Group North was isolated within the Courland peninsula in Latvia, where it fought until the end of the war. The shock of the German invasion in 1941 paralyzed and humiliated the Russians. Though heavily garrisoned with Russian troops, the Baltics proved an easy avenue of advance for the Germans, who gained support from locals on land and quickly dominated the Baltic Sea. The ultimate humiliation was the 900-day siege of Leningrad, which remains in Russia's memory today.

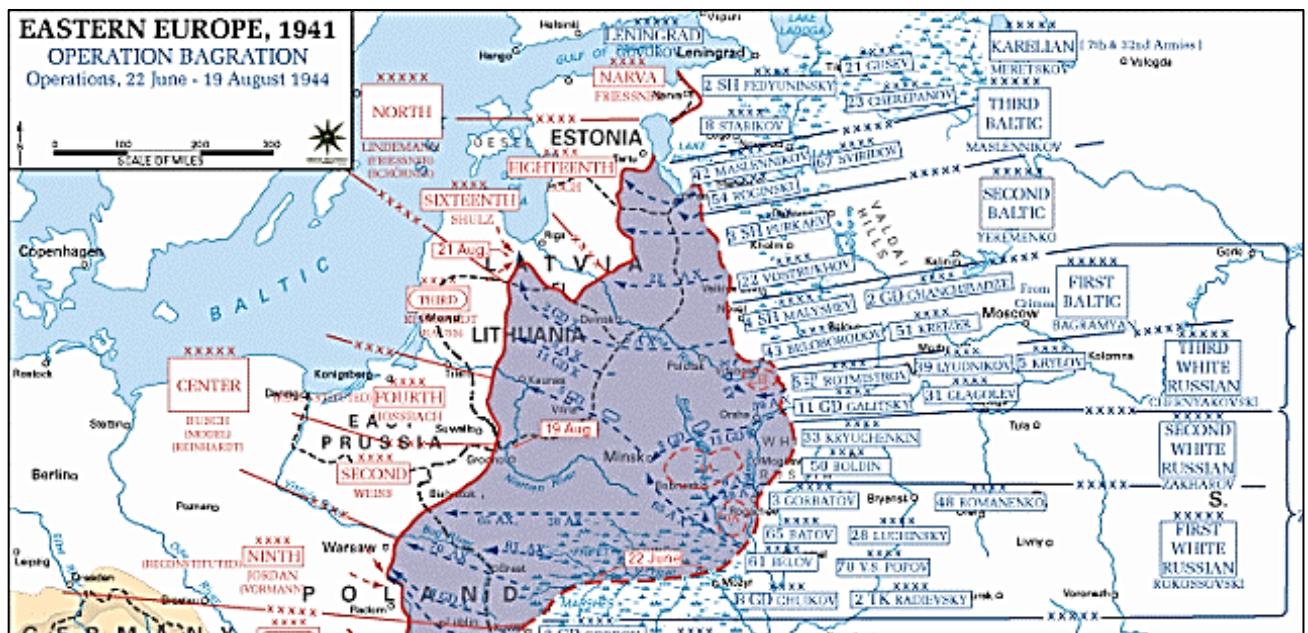


Figure 2. Operation Bagration, 22 June – 19 August 1944. United States Military Academy Department of History, “World War II European Theater,” accessed April 9, 2017, <http://www.westpoint.edu/history/SitePages/WWII%20European%20Theater.aspx>.

The fighting between 1941 and 1945 demonstrated excellent examples of German and Russian tactics and strategy during the war and influenced Russian views of the region following the war. Although tactics and technologies changed, the geographical significance of the Baltics

⁴¹ Buttar, *Between Giants*, 193.

remains the same today. The convergence of Poland, Lithuania and Belarus remains a critical hinge that connects Baltics to the rest of Europe. The significance is not lost on Russia, which maintains a strong military presence in the nearby Kaliningrad region. Although Russian armies today are not pressing through eastern Poland on their way to Germany, Russia still feels that the Baltics represent a vulnerable and dangerously exposed right flank.

The Post-War Baltics: Strategic Echelonment against the West.

In the official 1976-1980 Soviet Military Encyclopedia, Marshal N.V. Ogarkov explained that, since the end of the Second World War, the “experiences of the war and the new distribution of military-political forces in the world” shaped and influenced nearly every aspect of Soviet strategy.⁴² The significance of Russia’s 1941 debacle along the western borders manifested itself throughout every period of post-war strategic development, from the 1946 Forward Defense plan through the end of the Soviet Empire. Although Premiers changed and technologies evolved, the basic thought process behind Russian strategic thinking remained the same: we must defend against a rapid, unexpected attack from the west. The experiences of 1941 burned this basic idea into the psyche of Russian leaders, and it transcended the Soviet Union and remains in the mind of Russian leaders today.

The earliest illustration of this official posture was the 1946 operational plan for the Russian Group of Occupation Forces, Germany, or GOFG. The plan, created by the General Staff of the Armed Forces of the USSR, assigned several tasks to the GOFG, including:

...to assure the reliable repulsion of aggression and the integrity of the borders... to be prepared to repel an enemy air attack, including one with the possible use of atomic weapons; for the Navy to be prepared to repel air aggression from maritime directions [axes] and to provide support to Ground Forces operating in coastal regions.⁴³

⁴² Glantz, *The Military Strategy of the Soviet Union*, 169.

⁴³ Ibid., 180-181.

Despite its enormous standing army and impressive industrial output at the end of the war, Russia assumed a defensive strategy after the war, fearing yet another attack by foreign powers.

Throughout the Cold War, Russia's strategic defense posture evolved and it soon adopted a system of echelonment to make use of its vast territory and the threat of nuclear weapons. Russia also used geographic Military Theaters of Operation, or TVDs, to organize its forces. The most significant was perhaps the Western TVD, which included much of Eastern Europe and the Baltics. The Baltics served as a key geostrategic location where Russia could defend itself across Eastern Europe, the Baltic Sea and Northern Europe.

The Russians reestablished the Baltic Military District (BMD) in July 1945 (they had briefly organized a Baltic Special Military District in 1940, which was reorganized into the Northwestern Front after Germany attacked) and quickly set about rebuilding damaged military infrastructure, including air bases, naval yards and upgrading the railroads to Russian-gauge width. Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, the BMD focused on the installation of advanced air defense systems throughout the Baltics, as well as airfields for air defense fighters.⁴⁴ Although Russian military hardware in the Baltics appeared menacing, most Western experts concluded that the activities of the BMD were defensive in nature:

[Soviet military] installations were obviously not dictated by chance, but appear to be the manifestation of the execution of a carefully elaborated plan put into operation even before the beginning of the "cold war"—in fact less than a month after the signing of the armistice of 8 May 1945. What can be the nature of the conflict that is being prepared for by the masters of the USSR? Will it be offensive or defensive? It is not possible to say with certainty that it will assume either of these two forms: we can only hypothesize, beginning with a disposition which is certainly defensive in nature and manifesting itself by the establishment of air-naval bases on the northern flank of NATO....⁴⁵

Soviet military planners feared attacks emanating from the Nordic countries, or amphibious

⁴⁴ Andris Trapāns, *Soviet Military Power in the Baltic Area* (Stockholm: Lettiska Nationella Fonden, 1986).

⁴⁵ Chabanier, "Soviet Strength in the Baltic Area," *Military Review* 36, no. 2 (February 1957): 100.

attacks along the Baltic coast. Throughout the twentieth century, foreign naval interference disrupted every single Russian military endeavor in the Baltics. Following World War I, as the Red Army struggled to subdue the restive Baltic countries, a British flotilla supported the Estonians and facilitated the movement of Finnish troops fighting against the Russians.⁴⁶ During World War II German warships attacked Russian military targets throughout the Baltic and supplied Army Group North even after it was besieged in the Courland Peninsula.⁴⁷ As the Red Army fought to reconquer the Baltics in 1944 and 1945, Finnish volunteers infiltrated across the sea to fight the Russians, while many Baltic citizens fled on whatever vessels they could find. The only access to and from the Baltic Sea is geographically dominated by Denmark, Sweden, and Norway, and offers no natural offensive opportunities. On the other hand, the Baltic provides an excellent avenue of approach into St. Petersburg and the heart of Russia. It is no wonder that Russia concentrated naval, air and ground assets to defend the Baltic region.

Soviet military theorists throughout the Cold War continued to discuss the importance of deep echelonment to protect against threats from Europe. General G. I. Salamanov published a major article in 1988 that stated:

What, then, is new in the make-up of Soviet military doctrine, and how is it reflected in the nature of modern war? In the first place—it is the reinforcement, and the accentuation of its defensive orientation... Defense in the initial period of war is now regarded, not only as a means of bleeding the enemy with comparatively fewer forces, as a means of stopping him as quickly as possible and creating the necessary conditions for active counter-offensive action, but also as a [deterrent].⁴⁸

Salamanov and other Russian thinkers used the experiences of June 1941 as the vehicle for their analysis.⁴⁹

⁴⁶ Ben Nimmo, "The forgotten fleet: the British navy and Baltic independence," *Baltic Times*, December 15, 2004, accessed March 20, 2017, <http://www.baltictimes.com/news/articles/11541/>.

⁴⁷ Buttar, *Between Giants*, 247-248.

⁴⁸ David M. Glantz, *The Military Strategy of the Soviet Union: A History* (Portland: Frank Cass, 1992).

⁴⁹ Glantz, *The Military Strategy of the Soviet Union*.

By the late 1980s, as the Eastern European members of the Warsaw Pact began to crumble, the Russian defensive position in the Baltics became even more critical. As one expert noted in 1990:

The loss of forward positions and non-Soviet Warsaw Pact troops, in connection with the breakup of the Warsaw Treaty Organization (WTO) has forced the Soviet military to adopt a “bastion” defense strategy, similar to that adopted prior to WWII. The importance of the border districts, including the Baltic, is greatly increased in this strategy. Troops deployed in the border districts now comprise the first strategic echelon... Given the importance of the border military districts to a successful defense, the loss of the Baltic States, Belorussia, the Ukraine or Bessarabia (Moldavia) would seriously jeopardize Soviet western strategic defenses..⁵⁰

As the USSR collapsed, Russia watched nearly five decades of defense resources and planning fall apart, and her western borders exposed and unprotected for the first time since 1939.

Additional commentary in *Military Thought* by Russian officials and theorists throughout the 1990s and 2000s highlighted the security risks presented by threats from the Baltics and the historical ties to the Great Patriotic War. Following the Persian Gulf War, Colonel A.D. Borshchov warned of the threat from the United States’ forward deployment of forces against Russia. He explained that:

The situation that takes shape is somehow similar to the one which existed on the eve of the Great Patriotic War. In fact, transfer of the state border westward in September 1939 and the measures to reinforce it which then followed in the course of one year and nine months did not ensure a guaranteed repulse of fascist aggression. And a delay in solving similar problems today is no less dangerous. This is the essence of the first lesson from past experience..⁵¹

The same year, General V.N. Lobov advocated the dismantlement and removal of military hardware, facilities and infrastructure from the former Warsaw Pact countries to prevent potential

⁵⁰ Albert M. Zaccor, “The Army vs. The People: The Opposition of the Soviet Military to Baltic Independence” (master’s thesis, University of Michigan, 1990).

⁵¹ A.D. Borshchov, “Defense in the Initial Period of the Great Patriotic War (Historical Experience and the Present)” trans. Eastview Press, *Military Thought* July 1991.

enemies from using them and massing around Russia's western borders, such conclusions being "confirmed by the experience of World War II."⁵² Russia's fixation on military "infrastructure" will be addressed in the following chapter.

After the breakup of the Soviet Union, Russian fears of insecurity only increased, and the issue of security along the western borders continued to agitate military and political leaders. NATO expansion into Eastern Europe provoked intense protest from Russian lawmakers and military officials, and the anger has only grown with time. In 2000, General Andrei Nikolaev, chair of the Duma Committee on Defense explicitly compared NATO's eastward expansion to Nazi Germany, and argued that Russia was "flirting with the same fatal error made by Stalin in downplaying the danger of impending military aggression against Russia." Other military analysts echoed this sentiment and argued that Germany might attempt to reclaim 'East Prussia' (i.e. Kaliningrad).⁵³

Vladimir Putin and other Russian leaders consistently signal their disdain for NATO presence in the Baltics and increasingly highlight the threat against Russia from the West. Since the late 2000s, Russian activities evolved from vocal complaints to strategic messaging: the huge series of Russian wargames held in and around Belarus called *Zapad* ("west") are typically timed to start around 22 June, the same date that Operation Barbarossa began in 1941. The exercises involve a scenario in which NATO attacks Kaliningrad and other parts of Russia.⁵⁴

Putin and other leaders routinely make statements comparing the threat of NATO or the United States to that of Nazi Germany. Putin told the Russian Duma on the seventy-fifth

⁵² V.N. Lobov "Ways of Realizing the Concept of Sufficiency for Defense" trans. Eastview Press, *Military Thought* February 1991.

⁵³ William D. Jackson "Encircled Again: Russia's Military Assesses Threats in a Post-Soviet World" *Political Science Quarterly* 117 (Autumn, 2002): 373-400.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 391.

anniversary of the German invasion that Russia must heed the lessons from the Great Patriotic War today:

For now though, as was the case on the eve of World War II, we see no positive response. On the contrary, NATO is stepping up its aggressive rhetoric and aggressive actions close to our borders. In this situation, we have no choice but to devote particular attention to the tasks we must address in order to increase our country's defence capability.⁵⁵

In the context of 1941, it is not difficult to understand why Russia today is sensitive to the military and political dynamics along its western border. For forty-five years, the Baltic republics served as an important buffer zone between northern Europe and vulnerable population centers such as St. Petersburg, Minsk and Moscow. With this buffer zone now gone and NATO surrounding Kaliningrad and within striking distance of major population centers, Russia looks west and remembers the horrors of past wars. Given the successive invasions from the West since the nineteenth century, the Baltics look more like a staging area for future attacks than small, indefensible nations.

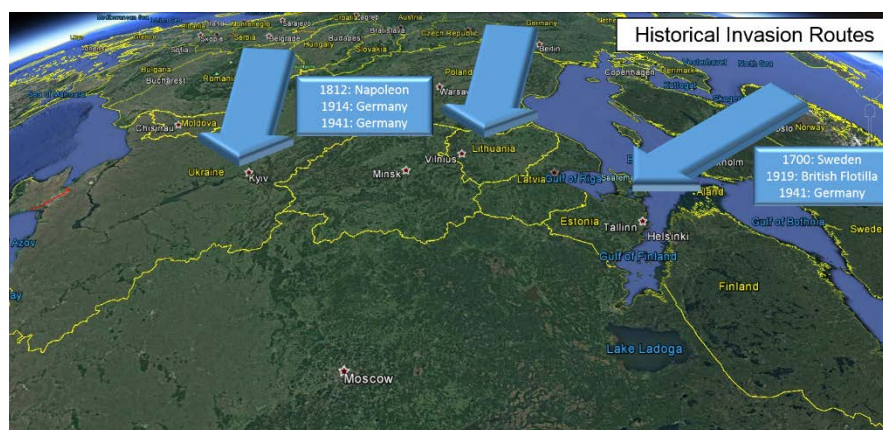


Figure 3. Russian Perspective of Common Invasion Routes. Adapted from Lauren Goodrich, "Russia Falls Into Old Habits," *Stratfor Geopolitical Weekly*, October 25, 2016, accessed January 27, 2016, <https://www.stratfor.com/weekly/russia-falls-old-habits>.

⁵⁵ "Vladimir Putin addressed the State Duma's plenary session," Website of the President of Russia, June 22 2016, accessed February 21, 2017, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/52198>.

The Threat from Within

The second topic that both contemporary and modern Russian officials frequently repeat about the legacy of the Great Patriotic War is that of Russian national unity overcoming the treachery of internal enemies. Since the outbreak of the war, nearly every Russian account of the conflict mentioned the lesson of the unified efforts of the Russian people overcoming all odds. The official Russian historiography largely credits the “spiritual and moral” fortitude of the Russian people for the eventual victory.⁵⁶ Other officials frequently cite Russian unity and patriotism as the underlying foundations of Russia’s victory in 1945, portraying the cause as a unified national struggle. A clear pattern emerges from reviewing both official and non-official Russian accounts of the war: the Russian victory was primarily an achievement of human and national greatness, not merely one of material or tactical achievements that Western historians tend to focus on. This underlying framework influences the unique way that Russians view their own history, as well as their contemporary security and political environments.

The theme of national unity is significant for several reasons. Russian leaders from Stalin to Putin exploited the narrative of national unity for various reasons, and the efforts continue today with important significance for Baltic security. While most Soviet leaders emphasized the theme of pan-Slavic unity during the Great Patriotic War to minimize the identities of ethnic minorities from places such as the Baltics or the Caucasus, today Russian leaders use a different approach. In order to discredit narratives of past aggression in territories like the Baltics, Russian leaders today emphasize the ethnic *differences* and the treachery of different ethnic groups during World War II. Russia accuses Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania of collaborating with the Nazis during the war, implicitly drawing connections to their membership in NATO today.

⁵⁶ “Volume Twelve: Results of the Great Patriotic War,” *The Great Patriotic War of 1941-1945* Russian Ministry of Defense, accessed December 4, 2016, <http://encyclopedia.mil.ru/encyclopedia/books/vov/tom12.htm>.

The efforts to Sovietize Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania represent one of the major legacies of the Great Patriotic War, and an ongoing point of contention between Russia and the Baltics. The Russian popular memory of the Baltics includes winning and losing the restive territories multiple times, and never managing to cement them into the greater Russian identity. During World War II, the citizens of the small, isolated countries found themselves caught between two murderous juggernauts who did not recognize or permit neutrality. Today, Russia uses elements of the Baltics' historical legacies from the war to generate nationalist fervor and discredit the governments of the three countries.

Historical Background: Social and Ethnic Threats and the Baltics.

Modern Russian influence in the Baltics dates back to the eighteenth century when Russia defeated Sweden during the Great Northern Wars. Under Russian tsarist rule the ethnic Estonians, Latvians and Lithuanians were generally treated as serfs, however large groups of ethnic Germans lived in coastal communities across all three territories.⁵⁷

Russia's stunning defeat by Japan in 1905, including the destruction of the Russian Baltic Fleet, encouraged nationalists in each country to push for independence. Russia's grip remained tight until the First World War when the Imperial Government fell apart and Germany managed to occupy much of Lithuania, Latvia and parts of Estonia. As Russia fell into civil war, the Baltic countries seized the opportunity and each declared independence separately in 1918. Between 1918 and 1920 each of the countries engaged in confused fighting to secure their independence. The fighting occurred amid the backdrop of Russia's ongoing civil war, internal domestic disputes, lingering German *Landwehr* forces, and various international military units, including a British

⁵⁷ Michael North, *The Baltic: A History* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2015).

naval fleet that aided Estonian and White Russian forces. In 1920, the new Soviet Union agreed to recognize the newly independent nations of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania.⁵⁸

The three Baltic countries maintained an uneasy relationship with the new Soviet Union throughout the 1920s and 1930s, and internal political discord hampered the three countries' efforts to gain powerful western sponsors or coordinate effective responses to growing Soviet and German assertiveness. Following the fall of Poland and the secret agreements within the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact to establish spheres of influence, the Soviets forced each of the Baltic States to accept troop deployments and pro-Moscow political parties were soon installed in Tallinn, Riga, and Vilnius, however popular Russian historiography generally argues that the Baltic nations willingly joined the USSR in 1941..⁵⁹

A common Russian theme of the Baltics during the Great Patriotic War is the treachery of various Baltic citizens working to subvert the Russians and aid the Nazis. Indeed, throughout World War II significant portions of the Estonian, Latvian and Lithuanian populations welcomed, and then fought alongside German invaders, viewing them as a preferable option to the Russians. Caught between two totalitarian regimes, the people of the Baltic nations had no good options to choose from during the war. Many Baltic citizens despised the Soviet Union, whose heavy hand they remembered before gaining independence, and they were very familiar with Stalin's murderous policies throughout the 1930s. Many welcomed the Germans as they swept through the region in 1941, hoping that a German victory would guarantee their independence from Russia..⁶⁰

The Germans initially experimented with forming auxiliary police and military battalions in 1942, calling them "Legions" so as not to inspire any nationalistic identities..⁶¹ By 1944, as the need

⁵⁸ North, *The Baltic*.

⁵⁹ Buttar, *Between Giants*, 46.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 31.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 139.

for manpower increased, the Germans raised roughly a division's worth of troops from each of the three countries, including the 19th SS Waffen-Grenadier Division (2nd Latvian), the 20th SS Waffen-Grenadier Division (1st Estonian) and over a dozen Lithuanian police and reserve battalions.⁶² Opposing their own compatriots were national units that the Russians had recruited: the 16th Latvian Rifle Division and the 8th Estonian Rifle Corps.⁶³ Numerous anti-Russian and anti-German partisan groups inhabited each country, further complicating the internal dynamics within the region. The complex nature of the fight in the Baltics contributed to hostile Moscow narratives after each country gained independence again and joined NATO.

After the War: Russian Control of the Baltics.

Although most historical accounts of the war end neatly in 1945, the fighting continued in many areas in Europe including the Baltics. Despite the presence of the Red Army occupying nearly all of the three countries, the various armed groups and disparate political parties continued to struggle for different objectives. Russia engaged in nearly a decade of counterinsurgency to pacify the region, a fact that modern security experts in the West often overlook. It is important to analyze this period because it provides a rare glimpse of what occurred in the Baltics following a Russian invasion—and what lessons may be relevant for today.

The most accessible research on the Soviet occupation of the Baltics and subsequent counterinsurgency efforts are generally those written by Estonian, Latvian or Lithuanian historians. Aside from occasional articles or entries about partisan warfare in Eastern Europe *during* the war, there is almost no mention of the struggles throughout the Baltic, Ukraine and Poland after the unconditional surrender of Germany in Russian military journals or newspapers. Whereas officials from the three Baltic nations made deliberate efforts in the 1990s to document and record the

⁶² Buttar, *Between Giants*, 149.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 155.

legacy of the Soviet occupation, comparatively few records have emerged from Russian archives on the subject.⁶⁴ It is difficult to characterize the Soviet perspective of this period however the existing historical accounts are informative.

As the Red Army seized more territory in the Baltics during the last years of the war, Moscow installed political bureaus within each country to oversee and coordinate political activities of each separate Communist Party Central Committee.⁶⁵ Russian authorities generally chose local citizens that were part of the national communist party or other trusted citizens. Moscow expected these bureaus to function as organs of the Russian state, although they exerted a degree of autonomy in local matters.⁶⁶ Russia's political goal in the Baltics immediately following the war was integrating the three countries politically, militarily, economically and socially; most historians simply designate this process as Sovietization. Complete military and political control were necessary so that Moscow could successfully integrate the new citizens socially and rebuilt the devastated industrial, military and agricultural infrastructure.

As noted earlier, fighting between Soviet troops and partisans did not stop in the spring of 1945. Different anti-Russian partisan groups made up of former soldiers, German stragglers and common citizens existed in all three countries, and many grew significantly in size after the war. Estimates vary, but as many as 30,000 Estonians, 40,000 Latvians, and 100,000 Lithuanians may have fought against Soviet occupation between 1945 and 1952.⁶⁷ These partisan groups sometimes referred to as "Forest Brothers", attacked suspected collaborators, communist party leaders and Russian military and police forces throughout each of the countries. The various partisan groups

⁶⁴ "Estonian International Commission for Investigation of Crimes Against Humanity," accessed March 20, 2017, <http://www.mnemosyne.ee/hc.ee/index.htm>.

⁶⁵ Alexander Statiev, *The Soviet Counterinsurgency in the Western Borderlands* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 6.

⁶⁶ Misiunas and Taagepera, *The Baltic States*, 76.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 86.

seldom coordinated their efforts, but their overarching goal was to disrupt Russian control over the Baltic in the hope that the Western allies would soon go to war against the Soviet Union and ultimately liberate them.

Researchers also debate the scope and severity of the insurgency throughout the Baltics. Some researchers generally downplay the significance of the insurgencies, particularly in Estonia and Latvia, where they argue that the fighting peaked in 1945-46 and only accounted for about a thousand casualties a year, primarily civilians.⁶⁸ The insurgencies, in other words, never truly contested Soviet control, and the counterinsurgency was handled by Soviet police agencies, namely the Directorate for Struggle against Banditry [*Glavnoe upravlenie po bor'be s banditizmom*] or GUBB, and the People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs [*Narodnyi Komissariat Vnutrennikh Del*] or NKVD.

Other historians argue that the insurgencies were far more serious and seriously upset Moscow's plan to reestablish control over the Baltics. Estonian, Latvian and Lithuanian researchers claim that over 10,000 Russian security forces or collaborators were killed between 1945 and 1952, including casualties from major battles involving partisan groups of up to 800 fighters engaging entire Russian divisions.⁶⁹ Partisans liberated entire towns for days at a time, and Stalin reportedly dispatched a personal envoy, First Deputy Commissary of the NKVD, General Sergei Kruglov, to crush the insurgents.⁷⁰ Some historians estimate that over 70,000 Russian Ministry of Interior troops and border police, reinforced by multiple army divisions, were assembled in Lithuania alone in 1948 to break the back of the resistance; tens of thousands more Russian police and soldiers battled partisans in Latvia and Estonia.⁷¹ The Russian counterinsurgency included massive

⁶⁸ Statiev, *The Soviet Counterinsurgency*, 125.

⁶⁹ Misiunas and Taagepera, *The Baltic States*, 90.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 91.

⁷¹ Misiunas and Taagepera, *The Baltic States*, 91

deportations from all three states, a policy that continued throughout Stalin's era and forcibly removed tens of thousands of ethnic Estonians, Latvians, and Lithuanians to gulags.⁷² Researchers in the Baltics argue that the total number deported under Stalin is an order of magnitude larger.⁷³

By the end of 1949, Russians had captured or destroyed most of the major partisan groups in the Baltics, although organized resistance continued into 1952 and 1953. Although Moscow enjoyed complete political and military control over the region, the Russians never succeeded in stamping out ethnic nationalism. In the 1980s, fueled by Premier Gorbachev's *perestroika* and *glasnost* policies, national Popular Front movements sprang up across the Baltics, culminating in the 1989 'Baltic Chain' protest involving two million citizens joining hands between Tallinn and Vilnius and the formal independence of each country in 1991. The Baltics, it must be noted, were not simply Warsaw Pact allies such as Poland, Romania or Czechoslovakia; Russia incorporated them as Soviet Republics after World War II, in cooperation with hastily-installed national communist governments. This is significant because it highlights the fact that Russia exercised total military and political control over the Baltics for over forty years—and Russia never succeeded in crushing their national identities. When security experts today consider the consequences of a complete Russian seizure of the Baltics, it is important to remember that it happened before, and it did not end well for Russia. Moscow knows this, but Western experts seem to have forgotten.

‘Weaponizing History’: Russian Narratives of the Baltics Today.

The Russian narrative of the Baltics provides important indicators of how Moscow views their neighbors and formulates policy towards them. Moscow uses several narratives for both internal domestic audiences and foreign policymakers. At the annual Moscow Conference on

⁷² Statiev, *The Soviet Counterinsurgency*, 177.

⁷³ Kasekamp, *A History of The Baltic States*, 146.

International Security (MCIS), Russian diplomatic and military officials share their views on the geostrategic environment.

A recurring theme is a military threat from NATO, either through direct military attacks, or via hybrid warfare. Russia views the “color revolutions” such as the protests that took down the Yanukovich presidency in Ukraine, as an insidious form of Western hybrid warfare.⁷⁴ The fear of color revolutions is tied to Russia’s historic fear of fifth-column enemies within the country working to undermine the government. These claims may be exaggerated, but Russian military and government officials present such cases routinely to justify actions, such as the 2014 incursion into Ukraine.

Another recurring theme at the MCIS is the buildup of NATO forces along the western border of Russia. Russian officials repeat the claim that NATO infrastructure presents a threat to national security. At the 2016 MCIS, Russian Chief of the General Staff, General Valery Gerasimov noted that the threat from the “constant presence of NATO forces in Eastern Europe regrouping the territories.... We see that these measures of NATO are increasing their military capabilities and are not of a defensive character.”⁷⁵ Colonel General Andrey Kartapolov, Chief of the Main Operations Directorate of the Russian Armed Forces noted that the introduction of military infrastructure near Russia’s borders will enable the rapid deployment of strike forces.⁷⁶

Perhaps most significantly for modern observers, Russia’s prevalent narrative today does *not* suggest any desire to physically occupy or dominate former Soviet space past the Russian borders. Russia is perfectly aware that Estonians, Latvians, and Lithuanians will actively resist such

⁷⁴ Dmitry Gorenburg “Moscow Conference on International Security 2015 Part 4: Russian views on NATO,” May 20, 2015, accessed March 3, 2017, <http://www.ponarseurasia.org/node/7695>.

⁷⁵ Statement of Valery Gerasimov, Moscow Conference of International Security, December 26, 2015, accessed on March 3, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ORM45IKLgZ0&feature=youtu.be>.

⁷⁶ Statement of Andrey Kartapolov, Moscow Conference on International Security, December 26, 2015, accessed on March 3, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ORM45IKLgZ0&feature=youtu.be>.

occupation, just as they did for nearly a decade following World War II, and there is no perceivable proxy force that could police these countries in place of the Russian army. The explosive protests in the late 1980s in all three countries demonstrated to Moscow that they never truly Sovietized the Baltics, despite more than four decades of political and social control. The recurring Russian narrative is not one of fraternal unity with these countries, it is a narrative of indignation about small, ungrateful neighbors that collaborated with Nazis and then invited NATO to Russia's borders. In summary, Russia struggled through a bloody, decade-long campaign to physically subdue the Baltics; there is no indication that Moscow desires to do so again.

Conclusion: Looking West Through the Lens of Russian History.

Whether or not Russian officials exaggerate the threat for domestic political gain, there is a real perception of danger from NATO forces on Russia's western flanks. Various Russian news outlets, Russian politicians and senior military and diplomatic figures continue to repeat the narrative of aggressively expansionist NATO forces that exploited Russia's weakness after the fall of the Soviet Union and steadily encroached eastward. Geopolitical forecaster George Friedman summarized after a visit to the Baltics and Russia that:

When Russians look at a map, this is what they see: The Baltic states are in NATO and Ukraine has aligned with the West. The anti-Western government in Belarus is at risk, and were Minsk to change its loyalties, Russia's potential enemies will have penetrated almost as deeply toward the Russian core as the Nazis did. This is a comparison I heard Russians make several times. For them, the Great Patriotic War (World War II), which left more than 20 million Soviet dead, is a vivid, living memory, and so is Hitler's treachery..⁷⁷

Russian military officials are acutely aware of America's ability to strike anywhere in the world with technologically superior weapons and follow military developments in the United States and NATO with great interest. Although American and NATO military hardware has already

⁷⁷ George Friedman "Borderlands: The View Beyond Ukraine," *Stratfor Geopolitical Weekly* June 10, 2014, accessed January 27, 2017, <https://stratfor.com/weekly/borderlands-view-beyond-ukraine>.

reached Russia's western borders, there are some military and political developments that Russian officials may consider intolerable.

Since the idea of expanding NATO westward originated in the 1990s, Russian officials have repeated their concern over military "infrastructure." In multiple news statements and writings, Russian officials repeated their firm rejection of NATO military infrastructure in Eastern Europe, though not necessarily military forces or equipment. The most recent 2015 Russian National Security Strategy even uses the terminology, stating that the "buildup of military potential of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO)... and the locations of its military infrastructure closer to Russian borders are creating a threat to national security."⁷⁸ This is likely not a case of political semantics, but a serious concern that fits the model of Russia's historical fear of invasion.

Russian military officials realize that brigades, divisions, aircraft, and ships can all project power for short periods, but without military logistical infrastructure, there is very little risk of a sustained military campaign. In 1941, the Germans massed enormous quantities of materiel near the Soviet border and constructed new airfields and railheads to support Operation Barbarossa. By contrast, NATO has thus far refrained from building large amounts of new military infrastructure in the Baltics or Poland; instead, NATO and the US provide funding for host nation modernization of existing facilities and upgrades to training areas.

NATO policymakers should understand that the creation of large-scale military infrastructure, including logistical bases, airfields, and transportation networks, will likely alarm Russian observers, probably even more so than large deployments of troops or equipment. Infrastructure is expensive, and it implies permanence and the desire to increase the capacity of what is in the territory already. New military infrastructure, from the Russian perspective,

⁷⁸ Spanish Institute for Strategic Studies "The Russian Federation's National Security Strategy," accessed February 21, 2017, <http://www.ieee.es/Galerias/fichero/OtrasPublicaciones/Internacional/2016/Russian-National-Security-Strategy-31Dec2015.pdf>.

transforms the Baltics from small, geographically isolated NATO training areas into an enormous staging ground for sustained military campaigns.

A similarly alarming development along Russia's western border may be any perceived European or American political meddling in Belarus. Belarus is one of Russia's oldest and most reliable allies, but there are indications that the country is attempting to open towards the West and minimize the leverage that Russia holds over its economy and security.⁷⁹ Some US think tanks even suggest that President Alyaksandar Lukashenka, disgusted by Moscow's invasion of Ukraine in 2014, is attempting to transition the country's economic, political and economic alignment away from Russia and towards the EU.⁸⁰ Whether or not this is accurate, Moscow would likely not tolerate a Belarusian defection to the West. Moscow has steadily lost ground to her opponents since the late 1980s, and Western military forces, openly espousing hostile rhetoric towards Russia, are now established in Germany, Czech Republic, Georgia, Azerbaijan, Slovakia, Norway, Hungary, Moldova, Romania, Bulgaria, Poland, the Baltics and now Ukraine. Belarus represents the last line of defense, the last buffer zone, and the last position of advantage against NATO and American forces.

Finally, NATO policymakers should consider the Russian political motives for any potential military action in the Baltics. A wave of recent research such as the 2016 RAND study implies that Russian tanks and infantry will steamroll into the capitals of each country, presumably to annex the three nations the same way Russia annexed Crimea in 2014. This logic has serious flaws, and contradicts Russia's historical lessons in the region. Physically annexing these countries

⁷⁹ M.F. "Why 'Europe's last dictatorship' is offering visa-free entry" *Economist* January 17, 2017, accessed January 22, 2017. <http://www.economist.com/blogs/economist-explains/2017/01/economist-explains-13>.

⁸⁰ Paul Goble "Are Moscow and the West Swapping Positions on Belarus?" *Eurasia Daily Monitor* January 31, 2017, accessed February 9, 2017. https://jamestown.org/program/moscow-west-swapping-positions-belarus/?mc_cid=06ef9deaea&mc_eid=837e196923.

amounts to both an open conflict with NATO, as well as a sustained counterinsurgency campaign throughout the region. Long-term physical occupation under these conditions is highly unlikely.

A more probable scenario is one where Moscow attempts to deny NATO the use of the Baltics for military infrastructure or disintegrate the political cohesion of the three nations, rendering them unable to coordinate with other NATO countries. The overarching political goal of any military campaign in the region is likely to prevent outside NATO allies from effectively massing any forces in the region that present a threat to Russia. Russia may accomplish this by attacking the political cohesion of the Baltic countries, or physically deterring the introduction of additional NATO forces, but permanent physical occupation of the countries is likely too costly for Russian leaders to consider, given their experiences in the twentieth century. Instead of anticipating a complete Russian annexation of the Baltics, NATO leaders and researchers should consider more nuanced Russian actions, such as limited military incursions that prompt political crises, or limited attacks against military infrastructure.

The Great Patriotic War remains the seminal event for modern Russia, and the lessons from it continue to inform Russian policy makers. The two biggest lessons, the need to defend the western border at all costs, and the threat from internal subversion or collusion, temper Moscow's geostrategic outlook. The Baltics, which represent the closest intrusion of NATO forces to Moscow and St. Petersburg, have important historical significance to Russia and served as an avenue for invasion and foreign interference throughout the twentieth century. Despite the threats Russia perceives, tanks in Tallinn and Riga likely do not present suitable means to an end; Western observers should anticipate more nuanced approaches to prevent NATO military infrastructure from threatening Russia and ensuring Belarus, Ukraine, and domestic populations stay loyal to the current Russian regime.

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